

The Little Door That Lives Within: Generating Subject in Poetry

Here's a poem about Yucca Mountain. Here's one about Pollock's *Full Fathom Five*. Another on a childhood gone wrong. And here's one on, from what I can gather, meat pants. Yes, meat pants. Pants made out of meat. My introductory poetry workshop students have little difficulty finding things to write about. Strike that; my introductory students have little difficulty finding topics to get them started. For them, the technological world abounds with information, from mathematical proofs to Napoleon's culinary preferences to deep, interstellar quasars. Indeed, these days the curious mind has no difficulty bringing a far, remote corner of the world right up to one's ear, a personal interview of sorts with just about anything one desires. The real difficulty many beginning writers have is exactly what to do with that topic, and more precisely, what the poem really means to say, which is generated in the process of the poem's unfolding. After all, the poem can only subsist on "meat pants" for so long, albeit sumptuously and deliciously, depending on the cut, I suppose. Ridiculous premise though, and perhaps I should have stopped the student at the mere mention of meat. However, if the poem is a universe unto itself, who am I to say what its particular physics are, or how it travels? Filet mignon slacks to an unlikely office romance to an insatiable hunger for another. What I'm most interested in here is the traveling, how a poem gets from one place to another, and it's this getting to another place that often baffles students. Here's a student poem from one of my intermediate poet workshops:

The Broken Column

the shock
when her eyes flew open only to blurrily focus in on
the already wounded body shattered destroyed devastated
 impaled
and later
the blood the bleeding the bleeding the babies lost
and later
the leg chopped like a tree, just a trunk
the betrayal of one's own body again again and again
constant pain like nails being driven into the skin
body pieced together with a cast
and the broken column rising up to hold her head
even though it is cracked and it will fail her again
 as it has failed her before
but the two perfect breasts on either side
full like hand sized moons

and her posture she hoists herself up so tall
and stares at me with those strong eyes
they sit beneath the unibrow
as if she means to say
don't you dare feel sorry for me
as if she means to challenge
as if she is just a rock in the barren landscape
her eyes swell up with storms
that escape and scream in the sky behind her
and there is a curve on her neck
that my hand wants to caress to cradle
as if that would be enough.

This poem is full of thoughtful, well-wrought images that employ concrete, sensory images. The poem's language is both elevated and familiar. The tone is insistent, albeit a bit heavy in places, but with a developing ear, one in which the writer is becoming aware of the relationship between the words and the poem's inherent music. This poem, like those of many undergraduate students', pushes both a physical and emotional register, something I like to call "visceral insistence". Everything about the poem's sharp language *wants* to be heard. And in a very physical way. Yet, something is missing. The poet has stayed too long with this visceral insistence, and the *want* to be heard is very different from the poem that *needs* to be heard. Here, the poem's subject (Frida Kahlo's horrible bus accident) insists itself on the reader...but for too long. What results is a poem that exhausts itself on the subject at the expense of a dynamism, a movement. More specifically, here is a poem that insists on a direction so strongly that the poem finds itself painted squarely into a corner. Although not the case here, this is especially true with the confessional poem in which the relationship between visceral insistence and explanation grow too strong, and the subject ends up being interesting only to the writer.

Hugo's Town

The students in my introductory class often are quite capable of writing smart, powerful images; however, as seen in the student example, often these poems struggle with movement. The poem inevitably ends up blue in the face from a lack of oxygen, and the poet fails to really say what they mean. Richard Hugo's "Writing off the Subject" from *The Triggering Town* is a solid starting place for these students, as it helps to articulate the "generated subject" of the poem. For

Hugo, the poem has two subjects, “the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or ‘causes’ the poem to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing” (4). The generated subject presents real difficulty for young writers for a whole host of reasons. They may know the poem needs to go somewhere, but find this difficult to achieve in subtle strokes without over-explanation. For some, despite their best efforts, the generated subject never arrives; in others, if the generated subject does arrive, it arrives too quickly or too abruptly, suggesting either the poet did not anchor the generated subject *in* the triggering subject or the two simply do not connect, as in a poorly written metaphor whose comparison of two objects lacks any illumination of the other. Hugo is especially helpful in the initial stages of generating subject; students take easily to the notion of a “triggered town” in which the details of a newly forming world are wholly their own. At the very least, they easily see the magic of a Hugo town, replete with silos and dive bars and chorus girls. However, they are often at a loss when confronted with exactly *how* to make such a transition.

Gaston Bachelard and the Door

Perhaps the appropriate metaphor for the student who has painted the poem into a corner is the door, that is, a door that can simply be painted: first, the rough outlines of the frame and the door itself, the placing of the door solidly in its hinges, then the delicate shaping of the lock, and the inevitable opening to arrive in some terra incognita. During a graduate workshop at the University of Montana, a student asked visiting professor Jorie Graham how the poet should consider the stanza, when to stay in it, when to break it. Her reply noted the etymology, its root in the word “room”, and that the poet should imagine the stanza break as that moment when the speaker of the poem can no longer stand to be in the room. For Graham, the sensation was a physical one responding acutely to the sudden disappearance of air; that is, the room had transitioned into a breathlessness, an emptied airlock devoid of time, dimension, life. It is only in this moment that the poet must confront the poem with the fact of a door, of the possibility of an exit.

Is there another image, literary or not, that represents so acutely the possibility of imagination, of the threshold between inner and outer? From an entire world revealed through the tiny keyhole in Johnson's *Clarissa* to Gregor's locked-in seclusion and alienation in *The Metamorphosis*, the door is not merely a marker of space, whether inside or outside, but truly an instant of perspective and then, perhaps, decision: once the new world opens, will the next instant be one of action or inaction? Gaston Bachelard perhaps expresses it best in *The Poetics of Space* when he writes, "How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect. If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one's entire life." (224). The doors of my own life are varied and yet distinct in their significances: the bland, suburban, particle-board door that looked out on a sliver of hallway from my childhood; the heavy, ornate, thrice-painted door of my first apartment in San Francisco; the battered, but polished dark oak tones of the office door that bears my name.

The Poet's Private Door

And so, in the poet's process of invention, it can be helpful in the shaping of Hugo's triggering town to imagine Bachelard's door. Of course, the poet must paint that door figuratively (though it might be interesting to see in my creative writing workshop 20 poems about a door). Once painted, that door should take us elsewhere, into one of Hugo's mystical towns perhaps. But, for the student attempting to handle the generated subject conceptually, here's the more practical question...but *how much* into that town? As we may remember from our Shakespeare classes, so much of a sonnet depends on the volta, literally the turn, the hinge, the moment the poem catapults itself into something more known, yet remote in that it remains a wish, a yearning. Once the room no longer has a breath to spare and the door is wet with paint, it is best to imagine the generated subject as not just an elsewhere, but also as a perspective, a way of seeing. Is the door open just a sliver, just a crack, with maybe the smallest of glimpses and slightest of light filtering through? Is the door open half-way, the threshold of a threshold, with the speaker caught between two worlds? Or is it wide-open, or maybe even blown off its hinges, the speaker plunged suddenly into terra incognita?

The Sliver of a Door

Who can resist that thin slant of light from a door just cracked open? Entire childhoods have been built and have fallen on this image. The door cracked open is about subtle variations, glimpses, and even a kind of surface resistance. These poems are about hints, half-suggestions. Although the door is mostly closed, its slim opening may represent a desire to be opened, an unconscious wish waiting for fulfillment. Often these poems slide along imperceptibly, due to the ease of the language or to an even tone. Here's William Stafford's "Once in the 40's":

We were alone one night on a long
road in Montana. This was in winter, a big
night, far to the stars. We had hitched,
my wife and I, and left our ride at
a crossing to go on. Tired and cold—but
brave—we trudged along. This, we said,
was our life, watched over, allowed to go
where we wanted. We said we'd come back some time
when we got rich. We'd leave the others and find
a night like this, whatever we had to give,
and no matter how far, to be so happy again.

Like many Stafford poems, there's the lull of the storyteller here. This is the kind of poem an infant falls asleep to when nothing else will calm him. The triggering subject here is an evening long ago, an open road under a wide swath of stars. Though it's easy to be seduced by the conversational, familiar tone (note only two words over two syllables, and both roll off the tongue: whatever and Montana), there are subtle variations in the tone, mostly as a result of Stafford's adept line breaks. Nearly every break creates an expectation, is saddled with a full anticipation. This is not the open tension of Komunyakaa's "Facing It" mentioned below, but rather one that is difficult to pinpoint, an imperceptible chill coming from somewhere even when all the windows have been checked and double-checked. The generated subject is born from this subtlety; indeed, the sliver of light, the crack in the door here is actually the distance in time and space implied by the speaker's return to this memory. The notion of giving whatever must be given and traveling whatever distance must be traveled in order to be "so happy again" suggests some...I hesitate to use the word regret. It's less than that, an unease in the subsequent years perhaps. Some disquiet. What is so astounding in Stafford's handling of subject here is the sense of some needling, untraceable possibly, applied to the intervening decades, to an entire lifetime.

If the long road in the poem represents the chosen path of the speaker and his love, then the sliver of doorlight here is a wish to return, that wish looking in on an entire cosmos, an infinite starfield of possibility that has lived with the speaker all these years, but remains locked away, untouchable...as if the crack in the door looked in on a universe walled behind glass.

The Door Half-Way

The generated subject as the door half-way is ideal for those speakers of poems that truly hang in the balance, often with little resolution. The generated subjects in these poems often highlight the oppositions and contradictions inherent therein and leave the speaker in an ambivalent state, either at the moment of decision or in a state of expectation where the outcome remains unclear. Yusef Komunyakaa's renowned poem "Facing It" is an excellent example of exactly this half-open door by poem's end:

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn't
dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn that way—I'm inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.
I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find
my own in letters like smoke.
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap's white flash.
Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
but when she walks away
the names stay on the wall.
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
wings cutting across my stare.
The sky. A plane in the sky.
A white vet's image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I'm a window.

He's lost his right arm
inside the stone. In the black mirror
a woman's trying to erase names:
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

Komenyakaa clearly establishes very literal oppositions within the poem, as evidenced by the variations of white against black (and red being the only color at a very significant moment), the light and darkness of the morning, the granite wall against human flesh. The triggering subject here is obviously the wall, but the generated subject is much more difficult to ascertain. After all, the speaker never leaves the wall...in fact, the speaker only turns his head from the wall for one brief instant in line 9.

What becomes clear is that the generated subject is the speaker's very own coming to terms with the wall and what it represents; thus, the poem's title, in which the oppositions are both literal and figurative. Komenyakaa's speaker is on the cusp between two worlds: the world of the past and death as represented by the wall, and the world of the present, of pressing on despite painful memories, and of life as evidenced by the world full of motion behind him reflected in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The poem's final line, however, doesn't resolve anything. Is the final image of what is arguably a mother and son coming to pay respects a tender one in that they remain...a kind of affirmation of life, of the resiliency of humankind, of pressing on despite the horrors of war? Or, is this final image one that evokes what has been taken away, a lost husband and father, an image in which we see the collateral damage of war, how it can extend far into families even a decade later? The two readings here aren't necessarily mutually exclusive either, and so the poem's ambivalence echoes nearly as loud as the speaker's own troubles, which aren't resolved either. The poem's very unresolved tensions within the generated subject leave the door neither open nor closed, and the speaker in a purgatory of sorts: neither here nor there, neither then nor now, and neither fractured nor healed.

The Door Wide Open

The generated subject as the door wide open posits the speaker in the face of an overwhelming realization or discovery that shakes the very foundation of the poem itself. Often, the central elements of the poem experience a disruption, most notably that of the tone, which slips much

like a faultline during an earthquake. Here is James Wright's famous poem "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota":

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

The first twelve lines of Wright's poem are all a kind of lulling, as one lying in a hammock ought to enjoy, I suppose. Softnesses abound in this sensuous world, and time seems to stretch, but paradoxically, in a collapsed, time-lapse manner. Indeed, a speaker who has time to encompass the hardening of horse dung into the alchemical image of "golden stones" wouldn't seem to have much pressing, even on a farm, where there is always something to be done; in fact, the first eleven lines read more like one of enraptured, sensual bliss...a nirvana of sorts. The poem's rhythm mimics this as well, as the first ten lines move in easy threes. It is not until the end of line 11 and then in line 12 does anything in the poem approach a kind of restlessness. I suppose it could easily be argued that there are hints of this in restlessness in "black trunk", "green shadow", "empty house", and "two pines". Still, even then, it's a lazy restlessness best expressed in the "floating" chicken hawk. But what if the poem had just ended at line 12? If it had, and the poem concluded on the image of the hawk looking for home, the final resonance would much more closely echo that of the door only open a sliver. A powerful ending in its own right, but one in which the speaker remains shrouded in hints and half-suggestions. Where is home? Why hasn't it been found? Not necessarily a terrible place to leave the speaker, but one that does not take full advantage of the poem's temporal constructs. The collapsed, time-lapse quality of the images are not fully realized in this poem until that final line...and as such, time stretches out again, into normal speed, into the here and now firmly between a past and future. The voice is singular in its discovery and realization, almost singularly outside the body, a voice from without. A similar, but more extreme voice is heard at the end of Rilke's "Archaic Torso of

Apollo”; the sudden and strangely terrifying “You must change your life” is not of the poem, not of this world, but rather the voice of something numinous, perhaps even the voice of God.

Even the experienced poet has difficulty with the subtleties involved in the shaping of the generated subject, in part because such working and reworking intersects with so many of the poem’s other elements: tone, image, form. As well, the imagining of the door as the poem’s volta can result in formulaic movement, one in which the poem’s scaffolding is laid too bare. Still, the little door within can be a powerful tool for beginning writers exploring how a poem can move, regardless of aesthetic (though I’ve clearly chosen more narrative poems for the sake of example); later perhaps, the writer can experiment with more subtle construction of that door. But, most importantly, the imagining of such a door as a perspective, as a view into some other world is not just about doubleness, it is about achieving what the poem really *needs* to say: “But then come the hours of greater imagining sensibility. On May nights, when so many doors are closed, there is one that is just barely ajar. We have only to give it a very slight push! The hinges have been well-oiled. And our fate becomes visible” (Bachelard 222-223).

Works Cited

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